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A Plea for Calisthenics;

OR THE

*Advantages of Physical Education
for Ladies.*

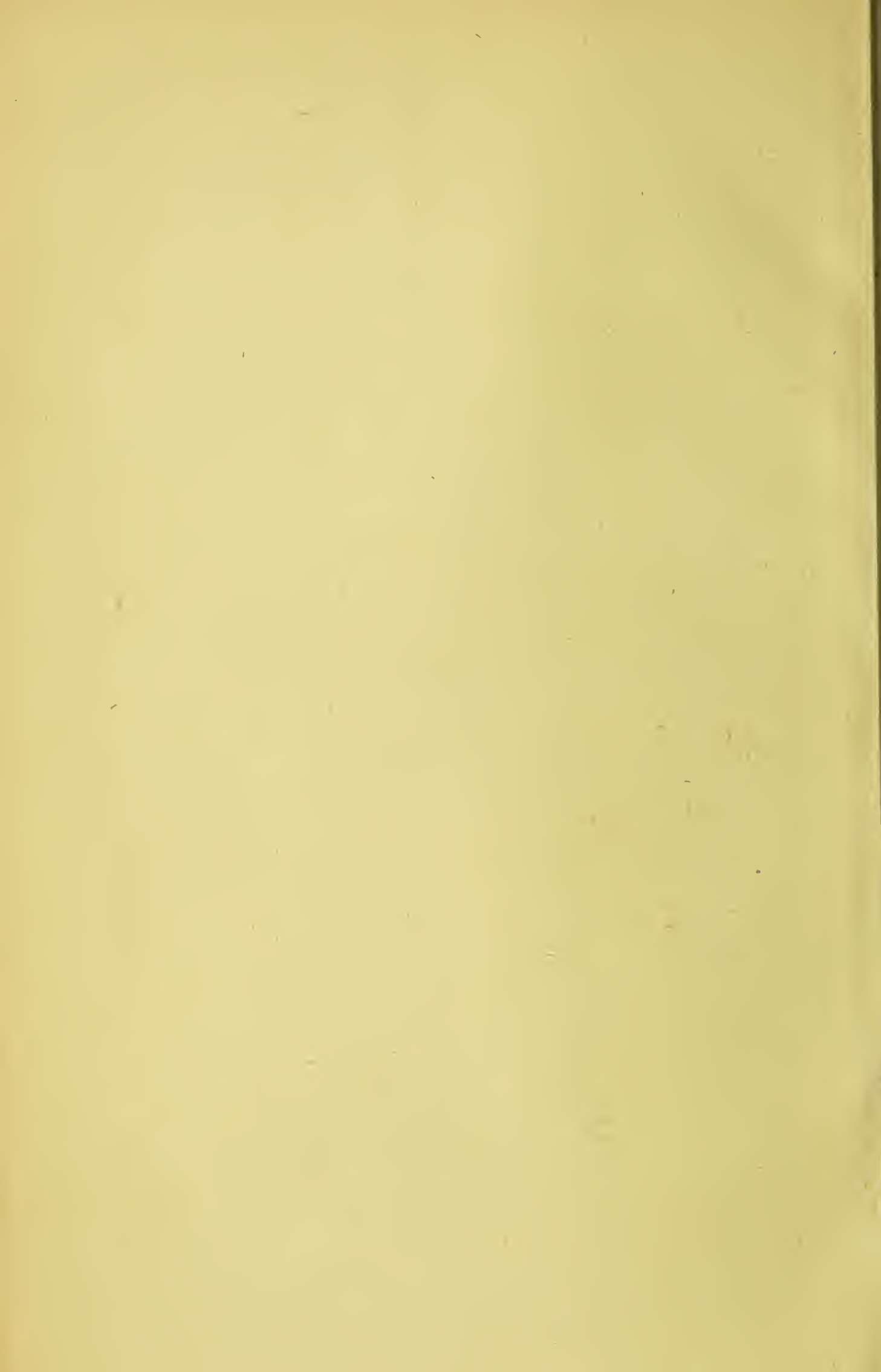
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SUMMARY.

Recognition of the importance of physical education to girls—Its modern date—Responsibility of parents and others in regard to bodily training—Its value—Artificial exercise specially beneficial and designed for the upper classes—Calisthenic movements preferable for the young to the rougher form of gymnastics—Application of physical exercise on the Continent to disease—Frequent malformations and defects met with in girls—Results of exercises in connection with such defects—Difficulties to be contended with and want of knowledge on the subject—The duty of parents and others to study the question—Necessity of time being given to physical as well as mental culture—Calisthenics suited to all ages—Where the practice is of special value—Dress—The most suitable time for exercise and duration of the lesson—The rule followed in the best schools—The Germans the originators of modern physical education—Frœbel's, Schreber's, and Delaspee's systems—Benefit of music to the lesson—Walking—Regarding apparatus—Dancing, its utility—Conclusion arrived at by a study of the subject gymnastics in Italy.





A Plea for Calisthenics.

NOW that the importance of Physical Education in the training of girls is becoming more and more recognised, a few remarks upon the advantages to be derived from the continued and well regulated practice of Calisthenic Exercises, by one who has had many years' experience, may not be inappropriate.

Formerly, though methodical exercise was fully admitted in theory to be beneficial, it was but little adopted in practice. Except in isolated instances it was seldom or never thought of with regard to girls and women, and even now while winning its way sufficiently to be ranked as a branch of education, it is not yet made of that importance which it merits, as being one of the most valuable aids to physical and mental development that we possess. That the subject has been thought worthy of consideration in connection with education is mainly due to those eminent men whose writings have done much towards enlightening the public mind on the

laws that govern health, and especially to the gentlemen of the medical profession who have urged its importance. In addition to this powerful influence, that which is now chiefly needed is the advocacy of parents and of those ladies who have the training of girls under their charge. It is on them that the responsibility principally devolves of watching the growth of the child committed to their care, and of seeing that the physical training keeps pace with the mental, so that the mind does not become enriched at the expense of the body, for it must be remembered that the strengthening of both gives the highest attainable excellence to the human constitution.

The value of exercise to women, in regard to health and beauty of form, was much better understood by the ancient Greeks than by the modern civilized world. As an example of the advantages derived from the care and attention given by them to the youth of the female sex, the acknowledged superiority of the Spartan women, solely due to the training they underwent while young, may be remembered.

The desirability of using similar means to secure healthy development seems, as far as the writer can learn, to have been entirely lost sight of in subsequent times, and until very lately this branch of education which, when followed, gives health, strength, brightness

of mind, and grace of movement to our girls has been almost wholly neglected.

Artificial exercise may be said to have been specially thought of, and methodically arranged, for the benefit of the upper classes and all those to whom labour is not a condition of existence. It being an established fact that exercise or labour, call it by what name we will, is essential to our well being, the utility of the practice of Calisthenics and Dancing becomes at once self evident. It is labour modified to suit individual circumstances—and may thus be termed scientific, curative, and hygienic. It however differs from, and is above and beyond labour because it brings into healthy action every muscle and organ of the human body without over straining or exhausting, and for this end the suggestion of due and proper Calisthenic movements has not been thought beneath the attention of men of learning and research.

The writer has used the word Calisthenic in preference to that of Gymnastic, designedly, to distinguish the exercises most suitable to children and girls, from the more violent and exhausting movements commonly understood by the latter word. Against these there is nothing to be said where the learner is strong and capable of undergoing much fatigue without injury to health and body, but violent exertion by means of poles, climbing ropes, trapeze and other similar apparatus is

neither beneficial nor fitted to girls or children of either sex. These, from their more delicate organisation, require quite another manner of discipline. In their case all exhausting exertion is to be avoided, strength and development of body must be induced by simple and progressive means only. Besides guarding against over fatigue and consequent weakness, we have also to guard against a too great looseness of the limbs. This is another reason why the rougher form of Gymnastics is objectionable for girls and those who are not very strong, for if nothing worse comes of this unstringing of the joints, so to speak, it is almost sure to impart an inelegant and shambling walk and carriage, which are, perhaps, worse than the awkwardness caused by stiff joints. For this looseness of movement brought about by the members being too relaxed, there is no remedy, and unfortunately, the tendency to this is often not perceived in time to be corrected. In the more simple system of Calisthenics prescribed in this little work, there is no movement but what may be performed with benefit by the smallest child, or most delicate girl.

In many parts of the Continent, but more notably in Germany, the practice of Calisthenics has been brought to bear upon diseases, it is, however, beyond the scope of the present treatise to enter into this, but it may be remarked here that those experienced in these matters

know how many girls are to be found with the spine irregularly formed, or with the shoulder growing out, and that these and many other imperfections in action and formation are the rule and not the exception. And although it cannot be said that physical exercise will always remedy these defects, still its practice brings out the latent powers of those muscles, and other parts of the human frame, which, from weakness or torpidity, are not performing their allotted share in the animal economy, and will, therefore, in very many cases, bring about a perfect cure. Were every muscle and bone of the frame possessed of its due proportions in strength and shape, nothing could be added from an extrinsic source, but imperfectly formed as we are, art steps in, as in other cases, to assist nature to remedy her malformations, and to balance or adjust her inequalities. Every muscle of the body being duplex, any weakness of one side gives undue power to the other, and hence, spring endless irregularities and departures from symmetry. This especially applies to the muscles of the chest, which are those least commonly exercised, and yet, upon which depend in the highest degree erectness of carriage, gracefulness of motion, and free play to the action of the involuntary muscles, affecting the first essentials to life, respiration and digestion. It is therefore evident that grace and harmony of motion are

intimately linked with health, and that, as we promote the one, the others are alike improved. The mind necessarily shares in the general improvement, it being an ascertained fact that there exists between the mind and the body not merely a relation or connection for the production of thought and action, but also one hygienic, or health affecting. But with all the advantage which physical exercise presents to our mind, it has to contend with this difficulty, its effects are slow, and at first imperceptible ; consequently, the inexperienced in such matters, forming hasty conclusions on a subject they have not taken the trouble to study or understand, fail to appreciate the utility of its *continued* practice. Even without any special study of the question, however, it is easy to see how impossible it would be to change the bad habits of years by a short course of artificial movements. Miracles are not to be performed here any more than in other phases of our existence. All that we can, and should do is to make use of the natural means given to us, and trust to time to do the rest. It is the process we follow in mental training. Intellectual culture is perfected by the accumulated practice of years and repetition of studies, the most approved by the higher authorities on education. All that those interested in physical training demand is, that the same patience, and waiting for results, may be granted for

the physical, that is granted for the mental culture of youth, and unless this is accorded, the value of this particular discipline can never be fairly judged or appreciated.

Although the writer has spoken hitherto of Calisthenic Exercises in relation to the young only, it must not be supposed that they are not equally beneficial to women of more advanced years. Their use need be confined to no age in particular. The simplicity of the exercises, which will be spoken of further on, is such that they may be practised even by the aged with profit. To those who are obliged, from involuntary causes, to lead a sedentary life, and others having a tendency to stoutness, their value cannot be over rated. In partial paralysis, also, or injury through accident, they have given, under medical advice, the greatest assistance towards recovery.

Dress forms a very important condition in physical training, and unless that is considered in connection with it, and is thoroughly appropriate to the work to be done, fatigue, and often pain, ensue when we are looking for the reverse. Happily, great advance has taken place of late years in the ideas concerning this matter, but occasional wrong notions have still to be battled with regarding it, and, among the less intelligent of women, we see the injurious practice of tightening the

waist still adhered to. A woman's dress should be easy at the waist, arm holes, and across the chest. If this is borne in mind it will preclude the necessity of any special costume being adopted for exercises. Easy ordinary dress, and thin shoes without heels, will fulfil all the wants required for practice. Care being taken besides, that stays, when worn, in no way compress the figure. In regard to stays, Dr. A. Combe, of Edinburgh, who has written so much on health, observes:—
“Let mothers who are afraid to trust to nature for strengthening and developing the limbs and spines of their daughters attend to facts. It is notorious that a majority of those girls who, in opposition to the laws of nature are encased in stays and get insufficient exercise, become deformed, an occurrence which is, on the other hand, comparatively rare in boys, who are left in conformity with the designs of nature, to acquire strength and symmetry from free and unrestricted muscular action. Stays and absence of exercise, so far from contributing to an elegant carriage, are directly opposed to its acquisition. The absence of stays and indulgence in exercise, even, when not carried so far as the wants of the system require, instead of being hurtful to the spine, contribute powerfully to its strength and security. Yet such is the dominion of prejudice and habit, that, with these results meeting our observation in every

quarter, we continue to make as great a distinction in the physical education of the two sexes in early life, as if they belonged to different orders of beings, and were constructed on such opposite principles that what was to benefit the one must necessarily hurt the other." *

The next questions which present themselves are of what duration the practice should be, and which is the best time to go through them. No rule for either can be laid down, both being so entirely dependent on circumstances. But though no rule can be given, it will be well to remember that the morning is always the best time for exercise, not too soon after the first early repast, or too near the one of mid-day. The duration of the practice will vary with the individual strength of the pupil. For healthy girls an hour, with occasional rests between, is not too much. In most of the best schools a portion of the day, a quarter to half-an-hour, is regularly given to this lesson under the supervision of a governess, which, with a weekly lesson from a competent teacher of exercises, is the method which, as far as possible, should be adopted. In home education and the schools for younger children, very little thought is given to the physical powers. It is not to be expected that every governess should be also a teacher of Calisthenics, but it is very desirable that they should

* Principles of Physiology, by A. Combe, M.D. Page 164.

make themselves sufficiently acquainted with the elementary exercises so as to be able to superintend their daily practice, and thus guide the child to physical as well as mental excellence. It is here that the co-operation of parents is strongly needed. Being the natural guardians of all that concerns their children's welfare, it rests with them whether their children shall make use of this rational means as a preservative to health, or let their powers be weakened and completely lost, as often happens, through insufficiency of proper exercise. Nature herself has prepared the way to help us in the right direction. Very young children take the greatest delight in Calisthenic Exercises. This is seen in the zeal, and the serious interest they display while going through the different movements. Unfortunately, the majority of the children brought up at home are deprived of this useful recreation, partly, perhaps, because it is difficult to break through routine. Yet nothing would be easier than to add the Calisthenic lesson to other daily studies. All that would be necessary to this end would be, in the first place, for them to have lessons in the elementary exercises, and then continue their practice at home, and this might be done by governesses accompanying their pupils to the lessons, and attentively watching the instruction given so as to be able to carry on the home practice.

Frederick Frœbel, Schreber, De Laspee, and Ling may be said to be the apostles of the movement in favour of a more healthy system of education and of modern physical exercises in this country and the Continent. * Frœbel's great love for children led him to perceive the two great wants of an infant's nature—movement and amusement. Hence his system, which combines the intellectual expanding of the infant mind by simple and attractive oral lessons, with playful un-studied exercise for the body, so arranged that the

* In 1866 the practice of Physical Exercise was first introduced into Italy by the Germans.

The following extracts from the Sixth Annual Report of Pietro Gallo, Director of Gymnastics in Venice, in 1872, speak for themselves :—

“Sei anni or sono la ginnastica era un vocabolo ignoto a Venezia oggi vi contiamo 7,000 alunni tra femmine e maschi.”

“La ginnastica si insegna in quasi tutte le scuole per interrompere la troppo continuata occupazione della mente.”

“In generale la nostra gioventù è debole e per la sua rigenerazione è indispensabile la ginnastica.”

Translation.

“Six years ago gymnastics was an unknown word in Venice, at present we reckon of both sexes 7,000 pupils.”

“Gymnastics are taught in almost all the schools, as a relief to mental studies.”

“Our young people are in general weak, and the practice of gymnastics is indispensable as a means to their regeneration.”

child is always unconsciously learning, yet always amused, and is therefore never dull, never fretful. The system is a joy alike for pupil and teacher. In several *Salld'asiles*, in Paris, visited some years ago by the writer, this method was carried out in great perfection, nothing could have been better devised for very young children than these kinder gartens, and many have since with success been started in England.

No attempt will here be made to describe the manner of performing exercises. Whatever description might be given would be useless, for simple as the exercises are they are far too delicate to be taught without instruction. It is proposed, then, only to enumerate those exercises, which many years' experience have proved to be the best and most efficacious for the purpose in view.

For girls who have passed from infancy to girlhood the exercises, methodically arranged by Dr. Schreber, of Leipsic and De Laspee (which are almost identical), are the very best that could have been devised.

With the usual German thoroughness, every possible movement that the human body can perform with ease has been arranged in an almost inexhaustible series of exercises. Perhaps their greatest merit consists in their extreme simplicity, their next lies in their variety. It is very desirable that the pupil should be instructed and have the attention fixed while performing the different

movements, and De Laspee's system of teaching by means of numbers is excellent in this respect. The attention required for the successive and changing numbers, varied at discretion by the teacher, serves to keep it fixed. Music should form a feature of these lessons, good and appropriate music being a great aid to induce the pupil to enter into them with due spirit; this, however, is recommended neither by Schreber, or De Laspee. They have thought that the intrinsic worth of the exercises themselves require no help beyond the able teacher's voice, but those who have had to deal largely with young people, and to conduct large classes, have become well aware of the important help received from musical accompaniment. It is a preventative of inertness on the part of the pupil, which is a drawback often to be contended with in these exercises. As in the nature of things a too frequent repetition causes the interest to flag, it is well to create a diversity from time to time in Calisthenic movements. This may be done by having recourse, after three months' practice of the first simple exercises, to rings. Smooth, polished wooden rings, three to four inches in diameter, are the best. With these many elegant and useful movements, founded on the simpler exercises, can be practiced, in conjunction with the elementary instructions. These second series of movements will always prove advantageous after the

first have been well mastered. For while the former embrace all that is necessary to insure a healthy muscular development, the latter impart a grace and harmony of motion to the whole body. These simple and natural exercises comprehend also the very grammar of the art of walking well, and here again we find the value of music, for the first condition of a good walk is an even step. We have all, at some time or other, felt the inspiriting influence of walking to military music, and have seen how well the motley crowd keep time and pace with a military band, or fife and drum. But there are some to whom music is no guide, the step, however, of a companion is, and for this reason marching is always better practised with others.

Although the simple German exercises comprise all that is necessary to a perfect development of the human body, and are preferable to the use of any apparatus, chest expanders, if made extremely elastic, and dumb bells and clubs, if of imperceptible weight, may also be used. It is essential, in making use of an expander, to avoid having the elastic band stiff, as this entails an undue strain upon the muscles of the chest and arms, and it is also essential that the dumb bells and clubs be of no material weight, because (this cannot be too often repeated) all unnecessary fatigue should be dispensed

with. When the late Mr. Samuel Goadby first introduced the Indian Sceptre Exercises the sceptres measured from a half to three quarters of a yard in length, and were loaded with lead to the extent of a quarter and half a pound, but we have learned and unlearned much regarding the strengthening influence of rational physical exercise since then, and we now know that the least fatiguing and simplest movements are sufficient in themselves for all salutary purposes. That is supposing there is no serious defect or malformation to consider. In such cases Calisthenics should not be resorted to unless under medical advice.

Dancing has only been alluded to incidentally in the foregoing remarks, it however forms no insignificant part of bodily culture, and should be learned in combination with Calisthenics proper, and for an equal period, being an additional and most valuable aid in correcting awkwardness of gait and manner.

There is, perhaps, no exercise that exerts so refining an influence in the deportment of a woman as this.

Dancing, in the true sense of the word, has nothing in common with fashionable dances. The one belongs to the poetry of motion and true art, the other to prosy every day life, custom and society, two domains widely asunder. Thus, for those who object, ball room dancing need never be acquired. But in whatever aspect we

regard dancing, whether aesthetically, or as a healthy, social amusement, its influence for good greatly preponderates over the objections that can be brought against it, and its practice should, therefore, be considered as a necessary part of a girl's education.

The conclusions to which we arrive by studying the question of bodily improvement are that, possessing from our birth innumerable faculties and capabilities, it is incumbent on ourselves to promote their natural development in ourselves and our children by the most rational means within our reach. By permitting these faculties and energies to lie dormant within us our life may be said to be but half fulfilled, and we lose the greatest of its enjoyments—health. Recognising this the great aim of physical education, and seeing also that walking, the only exercise commonly taken by the greater part of the population, is insufficient for what is requisite, we turn to that arranged by art into a system, and thus in a manner regulate that love of activity which nature has implanted in almost all sentient beings. This love of movement is the rule in human nature, and wherever we witness sluggishness of disposition in the young, or a too great love of ease, and aversion to movement in the old, we may be sure of something wrong in health. An active physical and mental life bespeaks a bright and happy old age. An inactive one

ushers in declining years, troubled with illness and feebleness and consequent helplessness, a weariness to themselves and a source of anxiety to all who are around.

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